

Sleep Series: ‘art by sleepers, for sleepers and art as sleep’

Shu Lea Cheang and Matthew Fuller

Humans look so harmless when they are asleep. Perhaps this is why sleeping humans, sometimes nude, are the subject of so many paintings and sculptures across many art historical periods. It is perhaps with cautiousness toward, but also in envy and wonder at this condition of apparent innocence, that we are interested in the possibility of modes of art made in or for this ‘third’ of life. Instead of *picturing* sleepers, we propose instead to address art to those who are asleep or to make events in the mode of art that encourage sleeping to occur. To do so is to try to tease open some of the possibilities of an aesthetics outside of the ambient condition of alertness or attentiveness that art often requires. It is to edge towards an aesthetics of the unconscious of a bodily rather than solely psychic kind.

To ‘fess-up, in the context of a book on curation, we write not as curators but as artists who have set events in play in collaboration with curators. As artists we have each been through various detours, including filmmaking, software, fiction, farming, science fiction, unscientific fiction, pornography, theory and many kinds of collaboration, so this series of projects plays out, in a particular direction, some of the imperatives and hunches that we have been working at over some time. Indeed, what we learn from this work is that art, with a bit of re-jigging, has no intrinsic boundaries and can adopt and rework any activity or state of being, any mode of thought or practice to potentially interesting effects. This capacity of art to adopt and rework existing practices can range from the most mundane to the most scientific or sophisticated. In this series of projects, we aimed, by and large, for the heart of the mundane.

This text reflects on a series of works, *Sleep48* (Stadtwerkstadt, Linz, 2018), *Sleep 79* (C-Lab, Taipei, 2018-19)ⁱ, *Sleep 1237* (Performa Biennale, NYC, 2019) *SLEEP7* (Malmo Konstmuseet, 2021) that build on the idea of an aesthetics of sleep. The claim of these projects – indeed, their slogan - has been that it is possible to make ‘art by sleepers, for sleepers and art as sleep’.ⁱⁱ

As an introductory text for the Sleep7 project in Malmo argues “Sleep is a refuge from the work of having a subjectivity, of having to endure, being alert, to respond; but it is also an unexplored aesthetic domain. We are still sensually and metabolically ‘on’ when asleep, just working in other registers. An aim of these projects is to find and to subtly work with, even to invent, those capacities. One of the aims of the sleep series is to find different ways of working with the expanding domain of aesthetics in the present, by working through the capacities of the unconscious body, reworking the philosophical caesura between the mental subject on the one hand, and the somatic object on the other.”

An early project discussion document from Sleep48 proposes that, “This event draws inspiration from the recent book *How to Sleep, the art, biology and culture of unconsciousness*. The aim is to gather artists, designers, architects, dancers, musicians, poets, critical technologists, performers, scientists and others to explore how humans might have an aesthetics without consciousness. The aim is not to explore dreams, which understandably tend to be overworked in culture, but to work out how we might develop an aesthetics that is native to sleep.

Sleep is a complex physiological phenomenon that changes over its duration and that has different cultural and physical expressions. Sleep draws out different capacities and aspects of bodies that are expressed in rhythms, hormones, variation in detectable activity, changes in the actions of organs and body-systems. Historically and across cultures, sleep has taken different forms in relation to light, work, sex, morality, sound, configurations of the body and understanding of the human. All of these and other factors can be considered as ground for precise, non-spectacular, experiment.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This series of projects, which is ongoing, have lasted from an overnight event to a weekend to three-months in duration. The project has involved collaboration with architects, medical doctors, brewers, herbalists, artists, programmers, writers, and musicians amongst others. We’ll say more about such collaborations in a moment.

What does it imply to have an aesthetic relation to the world without being awake? Art, attending to which usually implies being alert, but which also has a long history of working with the everyday, the bodily, and the imperceptible or intuitive is a substantial resource here. Equally, how might we rework things that are often outside of art, such as medical processes, or brewing, or the generation of sounds, so that new conditions for sleep arise? A text accompanying Sleep79 proposes some of the following approaches to forming an aesthetics of sleep:

“Duration. Projects that work over a period of time involve variation in waking state and provide a terrain for moving across from wakefulness to sleep with soundscapes and language to accompany and texture it.

Transposition. Refine everyday activities such as the making and taking of food and drink, the doing of exercise and movement, by transposing them into an art context .

Instituting. We seek an imagination of what the institution might look like were it to recompose itself in relationship to other kinds of bodily state.

Recording. What archives of sleep can we find in film, books, sound, art? What records are made by and of sleepers? What kinds of archives might be assembled for sleepers, when they are awake, to understand this third of life?

Rethinking. We open the question of the organism up to experiment and enquiry. Sleep can be understood as placing us in a position of vulnerability; something we share with the nonhuman participants in the world and a valuable condition from which to think and to act.”

Each of these are little basic gestures available in both art and different aspects of everyday life in different ways. They are basic gestures in that they are of the mundane, nothing special per se, but as they nudge their objects a little sideways into the registers of reflexivity and experiment that the register of art affords, it allows them to loosen from their moorings in daily habits, in the taken for granted. In this there is a certain interplay between matter-of-factness and complexity. The former quality, of course, has an affinity to dumbness or stupor that can be full of its own kinds of sleepy nuance that these events establish the chance to experience.

Sleep is also troubled in the present. It is gnawed at by the extensions and precariousness of work, as Jonathan Crary says in his book ‘24/7’.^{iv} Sleep is effaced by the always-on nature of the internet and is made difficult by anxieties about things that are not given any political formation or resolution and so are rendered ‘personal’ – things such as the bringing to failure of the planetary eco-system in order to keep oil profits at a reasonable margin. We face not only the society of the spectacle, but the society of insomnia.

Sleep is a sort of retreat from the world, or, alternately, a different kind of participation in it; one that is a biological necessity that is reworked and understood culturally in ways that remain unusually settled. As such, it is a potential ground for experiment with what queer and trans activists and thinkers have called Somatechnics, where bodies and techniques are conceptually and practically attended to in order to elicit new expressive capacities.^v Attention to minor variations in the way we move, or use our bodies is often the purview of dance and choreography – or through approaches such as Alan Kaprow’s emphasis on attention to minor intimate activities.^{vi} Attention to physicality, not only in the grace and precise movement of dance, or the mindful recognition of immediacy, but also in the non-sense of slackness and repose provides a layer to this work.

Such work encourages us to see the over-recurrent phrase “the body” as sometimes being an unhelpful category; something too settled upon and a little inert – but not in a good way. Rather, we see sleep, and the bodies that partake in it as an unfinished process, more of an alliance of parts, as the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles had it, than a done deal. Bodies are assemblages of ideas, organs, capacities, technologies, cultures, customs, habits and so on. The potential for thoughtful and playful reworking that is inherent to the psychic and phantasmatic investment of bodies accounted for by Judith Butler or the perspectival shifts in where agency lies proposed in the thinking of Paul Preciado, where hormones and other chemicals are taken on as cultural operators, inspire this work.^{vii} Indeed, regarding hormones, and their chemical precursors, working with herbalists, artists gathering herbs, with cooks and artists making food, and with brewers – to make the series called *schlafgutbier* afresh at each location - have been ways we have sought to add direct and sensuous biochemical and gustatory aspects to the events. Food and the arousal or sleepiness it may induce has been a key part of these works and their aim at the gestation of sleep in relation to everyday pleasures transposed. Art is to be experienced, in part and perhaps at a tangent, by the tongue and the belly and in the hoppy fuzz of the aromatic bubbles drifting in a glass.

Here, as in other ecologies, the ‘meaning’ of a chemical changes according to the body receiving it – caffeine for instance is present as a defence chemical in many plants, albeit in small amounts, to deter predation. Curiously, caffeine, that foe of slumber, is also present in some floral nectar, motivating bees and other pollinators. The assemblage bodies of the people who come to take part in the events can be addressed in different ways and by materials and techniques that elicit various capacities for being affected. There are multiple ways in which biological systems translate, mediate, operate, synchronise and interfere with sleep processes.

It is the combination of bodily systems, such as digestion, or the cycles, rhythms and timings in sleep that provide different ways in which they can be addressed and, in some ways, seduced into operation. Regarding timings, what chronobiologists call *Zeitgebers*, time-givers, such as light, noise, habit, and so on, also apply to the institution whose habits tend towards the staid. Making sleep the primary mode of cultural participation changes relations to time, making the museum or art space roll and jitter a little in its sleep. *Zeitgebers* also include the wider media ecologies of sleep that, for instance, Ida Börjel points to in her poem *Click Wrap*. Here they are intimate to and an elaboration of the person to the point that what we experience as the “proper” subject of liberal individualism becomes an interface to wider systems of recording, communicating and analysing typified by social media or the smartphone.^{viii} Working with sleep can play a part in testing, reworking or refusing such conditions.

Other approaches to mediation can be provided by collaboration with scientists. Kenton Kroker's rich history of sleep medicine, *The Sleep of Others*, can be read in part as a narrative begun by a series of often quite eccentric explorers of bodily conditions and capacities.^{ix} With self-experiment being a common early form of work in this area, there is a partial commonality with performance art that we aim to gently elaborate. One element of *Sleep48* for instance consisted of "Sleep Races" a collaboration with generous and convivial medics from the sleep clinic in Linz. This was not a glamourising or awed relation to science, nor a suspicious one (two sides of the same coin) as is sometimes present in art, but a joint transposition of its ways of working into a different context. The sleep races took medical and scientific ways of working and recontextualised them in order to emphasise their aesthetic working. In this case, pairs of sleepers were prepared with full "polysomnographic" equipment monitoring oxygen levels, heart-rate, eye movements, brain activity and so on. They were then given a bed each and left to fall asleep. The polysomnograph was displayed live on a large screen in a public square outside Stadtwerkstadt where it was treated as something akin to a sports spectacle. Doctors gave informed commentary on the stages of sleep and the variance in the graphs of the two sleepers.

This public event took place in a large polytunnel, of the kind used in agriculture to increase sunlight and temperature. By contrast, the group setting it up, No Architects, aimed at contributing to *Sleep48* by providing a place to sleep and to experience the work. The projects in the sleep series are generally not object-focused, but they can also work with the generative capacities of sleep. We only have to imagine what architecture would look like if the human species did not need sleep. Sleep makes demands on space. BK Yeh, the architect who worked on the Taipei edition made "Mobile Sleep", beds based on traditional market-traders' or workers' hand-pulled carts, but with the addition of an awning, mattress and blanket. Other events variously used camp beds, blankets, futons and scaffolding, or other means, to create spaces for audience participants.

Another dimension of the three most recent runs of the project has been the inclusion of readings. An initial text for *Sleep1237*, held from sunset to sunrise, proposes that, "Sleep and text have a tangled relationship. A good book, a thrilling message, or an unwanted bill can keep you awake, but other kinds of text bring on sleep in often unexpected ways. Twelve invited readers will be asked to select texts that they consider especially soporific: such as code, philosophy, literature, diaries, manuals, and laws – and read them in a way that encourages sleep. These readings will not enhance the message conveyed by the text but rather expand on a traditional use of text." This approach provides the general template for the sleep readings, initiated in Taipei. Over time, the readers have extended our experience of the soporific in remarkable ways. Earlier movements, such as surrealism, used text and other media to report back from sleep and hypnagogia (the phase sometimes experienced between sleep and wakefulness) in inspiring ways. Here, we respond to their call by finding a way to get back into sleep, via text, in the society of insomnia.

A further such way into sleep has been via sound. Each event has included series of performances by artists, musicians and others working with sonic media and music to encourage or gently interact with sleeping audiences. Cycles, rhythms and timings in sleep provided a point of reference for many compositions where the frequencies of sounds and of beats tied into the rhythm of breathing or the frequencies of brainwaves associated with different periods of sleep. The performances by musicians and sound artists tease out some

of these possible reworkings in overnight settings with audiences participating by reclining on beds.

Of course, the audience doesn't just take it lying down. Often, we see a certain proper amused or cautious awkwardness in those taking part. We can call this critical distance, a prerequisite for engaging with contemporary life, but it can also be worded as bodily caution, a necessary dose of disbelief that is essential to all participation, one that allows a little iterative latitude in the ongoing formation of the self. Sleep of course is another kind of detachment to the critical sort, but it is perhaps one that may be entered into critically. That is to say that in these projects we do not expect a naïve 'participation', or, worse, the delivery of something like a 'wellbeing' service, but to set up communication between two forms of detachment by means of which sleep may be sensed through a little further.

In these projects we have tried to work with an aesthetics without a classically constructed subject. That is to say, without an implied viewer of participants that is awake, alert, and perceptually attentive or contemplative. We move instead towards a form of aesthetic engagement that is lively and dynamic but operating by different modes and registers of sensation and sense-making but that maintains interpretative thoughtfulness whilst registering it at different scales of organismic culture. Throughout, interference patterns between interpretative and performative frameworks and techniques, and the conditions they are normally "applied" to, are opened up as a mode of playful enquiry alongside the reworking of daily organismic habits, necessities and imperatives.

Bios

Shu Lea Cheang is an artist and filmmaker whose work aims to re-envision genders, genres, and operating structures while engaging in social interface and open network constructs. As a net art pioneer, her *BRANDON* (1998 - 99) was the first web art commissioned by New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. From homesteading cyberspace in the 90s to her current retreat to post net-crash BioNet zone, Cheang takes on viral love and bio-hacks in her current cycle of works. In 2019 she represented Taiwan with *3x3x6*, a mixed media installation at the Venice Biennale 2019. Cheang is currently at work on *UKI*, a viral alt-reality scifi cinema. <http://mauvaiscontact.info>

Matthew Fuller is Professor of Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London and an artist who has collaborated with numerous groups. Publications include *How to Sleep: the art, biology and culture of unconsciousness*, (Bloomsbury 2018), *How to be a Geek, essays on the culture of software* (Polity 2017), with Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media* (MIT 2012), with Olga Goriunova, *Bleak Joys, aesthetics of ecology and impossibility* (Minnesota 2019) and with Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics, conflicts and commons in the politics of truth* (Verso 2021).

ⁱ *Re-Base: When Experiments Become Attitude*, Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab, Taipei, 2019

ⁱⁱ The various projects in this series are documented on Shu Lea Cheang's website at:

<http://mauvaiscontact.info/sleep>

ⁱⁱⁱ The reference is to, Matthew Fuller, *How to Sleep, the art, biology and culture of unconsciousness*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019)

^{iv} Jonathan Crary, *24/7, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, (London: Verso, 2014)

^v Samantha Murray, Nikki Sullivan, eds., *Somatechnics, Queering the Technologicalisation of Bodies*, (London: Routledge, 2016)

^{vi} Alan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

^{vii} Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter, on the discursive limits of sex* (London: Routledge, 1993). Paul Preciado, *Testo Junkie, Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in The Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013)

^{viii} Ida Börjel, "Click Wrap", 2020, *Granta*. <https://granta.com/click-wrap/>

^{ix} Kenton Kroker, *The Sleep of Others and the Transformations of Sleep Research*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)

DO NOT SHARE - FOR COURSE USE ONLY